American Security Project

Fact Sheet:: Yemen

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FACT SHEET

Fact Sheet: Yemen

Ollie Engebretson

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Yemen is currently in a historic period of political transition following the 2011 revolution and the end of former President Saleh's regime.

At the mid-point of its National Dialogue process, designed to forge a unified solution to the various issues beleaguering the country, Yemen still faces many challenges to achieving political stability and economic growth.

In the last four years, three terrorist strikes launched from abroad against the United States originated in Yemen. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), based in Yemen, claimed responsibility for all three attacks (Al Qaeda was also responsible for the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole).[1] These terror incidents have made Yemen a top priority for U.S. policymakers.

Here are some basic facts about what the U.S. is doing in Yemen, organized into three broad categories of relevance.

Historical Background

- National politics are still dominated by the 1990 unification of North and South Yemen. The countryside often works through tribal groups and tribal politics, which outsiders rarely understand well.
- North Yemen was originally part of the Ottoman Empire's southern territory. When the Empire collapsed in 1918, the territory became the Muttawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen, and later the Yemen Arab Republic after a 1962 coup that deposed Imam Muhammad al-Badr.[2] The ensuing conflict between Nationalist and Royalist forces witnessed both Egyptian and Saudi intervention and continued into the next decade.[3] President Ali Abdullah Saleh consolidated power in 1978.[4] Colloquially referred to as North Yemen, this region contained modern-day Yemen's capital, Sana'a.

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- South Yemen was a British protectorate formed in 1839, centered around the port city of Aden. Upon British withdrawal in 1967 after years of combating guerilla forces, it became the People's Republic of Yemen and later the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, a Marxist, one-party state controlled by the Yemeni Socialist Party.[5]

- North and South Yemen had strained relations for a long time following the 1990 unification, exacerbated by the economic crisis resulting from Yemen's support of Iraq during Operation Desert Storm.[6] Tensions culminated in a bitter civil war in 1994, won by forces loyal to Saleh. Today, Sana'a and Aden remain the two major poles of Yemeni politics.

- There are at least two secessionist movements within Yemen: the Houthis in the north near the border with Saudi Arabia and the various southern groups in the south (loosely coalesced as the Southern Mobility Movement or Hirak).[7] The Houthis are a small tribal group organized around the Zaydi sect of Shia Islam who have resisted control from Sana'a ever since the 1962 coup.[8] Both secessionist groups are complicated by AQAP's insurgency in the south-central part of the country.

- Yemen often faces street protests. However, in 2011, these protests reached a fever pitch alongside the rest of the Arab Spring, which convinced Saleh, a northerner who had ruled Yemen for decades, to resign and transfer power to his southern vice president, Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, to take over the presidency.[9]

- Yemen's National Dialogue Conference, seen by many as the cornerstone of the political transition process, began on March 18th of this year. Scheduled to last six months, the dialogue brings together representatives from across the political and social spectrum to address the various crises afflicting the country and pave the way for elections in 2014.[10]

Yemen is important to U.S. commercial and strategic interests.

- Yemen sits near major shipping lines that carried more than 3.5 million barrels of oil per day in 2010.[11] Though Yemen has its own oil industry, production is down and it is in decline.[12] While there is no immediate threat to those lanes from insecurity in Yemen,[13] policymakers remain worried about possible spillover.

- The U.S. also has an interest in stymieing terrorism in the region. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), considered the most lethal branch of Al Qaeda by the U.S. Department of State, has a complicated history in the Arabian Peninsula, with roots in Saudi Arabia and a worrying crossover with other groups in Yemen.[14]

- Deep water ports such as Aden are indicative of Yemen's past and future potential as a regional commercial center should the country's security environment improve.

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Yemen is politically, socially, and environmentally unstable.

- President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, who replaced long-serving President Ali Abdullah Saleh in a no-contest election last year, is a southerner but is widely disliked there.[15] Hadi has initiated several modest reform efforts, yet he has proven inconsistent on tackling political corruption and nepotism.[16]

- To support Hadi's government, President Obama issued an Executive Order last year imposing penalties on Americans who seek to obstruct Hadi's rule.[17] Similarly, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2051 supporting governmental reform by demanding "the cessation all actions aimed at undermining the Government of National Unity and the political transition" in Yemen.[18]

Qat market, Sadah

- More recently, AQAP has adopted a sophisticated, Taliban-like insurgency in the south, posing as a political group called Ansar al-Sharia; this group has, in several important aspects, adopted the southern goal of secession as its own, while still advancing the radical goals of AQAP.[19] They have also occupied southern towns that the Yemeni Army has cleared at great cost.[20]

- Yemen is facing an unprecedented water shortage, and when supplies reach critical levels the shortages will probably spark a new round of instability.[21] Water and food shortages are, in part, tied to the extensive cultivation of qat, a narcotic regularly consumed by approximately 7 million Yemenis[22] and the primary income source of an estimated 2.5 million.[23]

- Yemen's economy is shackled by extremely high unemployment (40% among Yemeni youth according to the World Bank), [24] which could potentially drive further social instability as the jobless take to the streets in protest.[25]

America actively engages with Yemen economically and militarily.

- The United States has expanded its foreign assistance to Yemen every year for more than half a decade: from $62 million in 2006[26] to $346 million in 2012.[27] It was part of a global $7.5 billion pledge to assist the country.[28]

- $117 million of Yemen's 2012 foreign assistance package was slated to support humanitarian efforts, with an additional $68 million provided for development and transition programs.[29] The remainder was designated for security assistance: approximately $49 million from the Department of State and $112 million from the Department of Defense.[30]

- There are over half a million internally displaced people within Yemen, a quarter of a million refugees, and over a hundred and fifty thousand migrants and asylum seekers that are covered by the humanitarian assistance package. The U.S. development and transition programs go towards

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supporting the development of political parties, increasing political participation amongst women and youth, reforming the electoral system, supporting micro-finance and infrastructure projects, and rebuilding medical clinics and training medical personnel.[31]

- $75 million is dedicated to counterterrorism programs in Yemen: $29 million for night vision goggles and communications equipment, $13.3. million for trucks and drones, $15.1 million for small arms, $1.5 million for two new expeditionary bases, and costs associated with hosting U.S. special forces trainers.[32]

- US troops have a long-standing training relationship with the Yemeni army.[33] After a temporary stall in cooperative counterterrorism efforts, the US has renewed training missions to combat the threat of violent extremism in Yemen.[34] To more effectively facilitate this mission, the White House has exempted Yemen from the provisions of the Child Soldiers Prevention Act.[35]

Ollie Engebretson is a policy researcher focusing on Asymmetric Operations at the American Security Project. He currently studies Foreign Affairs and Economics at the University of Virginia.

This is an updated version of an ASP report by Joshua Foust in September, 2012.

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